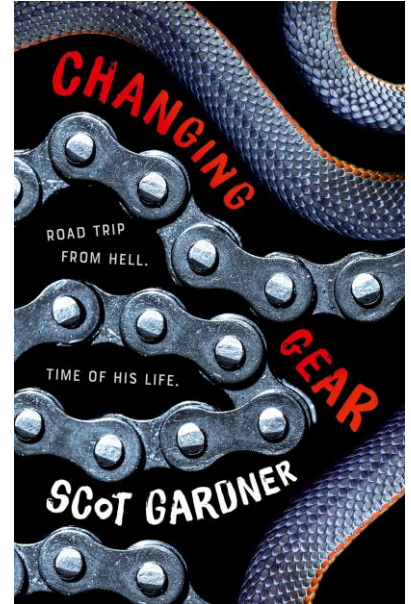


# Changing Gear

By Scot Gardner

June 2018 ISBN 9781760631468 paperback  
Recommended for 14-18 year olds



## Summary

Merrick Hilton's done a runner.

His folks think he's studying, but the real world has been calling for years and he can't ignore it any longer. A postie bike, a bedroll and a big sky – that's all he needs.

But there's no telling how he'll handle the rough stuff, let alone roadkill, stolen oranges and unexpected romance. And in the real world nothing goes entirely as planned. Thankfully Victor – the old bloke he meets on the road – knows a thing or two about broken bike chains. And broken hearts.



While framed as a road-trip, *Changing Gear* takes on important themes that speak to teenagers (including male 'non-readers'). In its head, the story explores materialism, education and the dominant work paradigm of the West. In its heart, it asks questions about sex, love and death, commitment, blended families, the nature of friendship and the concept of 'home'.

With warm and engaging characters, philosophical themes and a strong dose of humour and honesty, this is a fantastic read for teenagers and those who work with them.

*Changing Gear* is an existential drama, borne on the wings of an ill-fated road trip that flowers into a non-romantic intergenerational love story.

## Use in the curriculum

Another exceptional and compelling novel from a CBCA Book of the Year Winner, *Changing Gear's* wide-ranging themes are ideal for classroom discussion, especially in Years 10 and 11.

## In the English classroom

Scot Gardner is a writer whose work generally appeals to young male readers, although this tendency neither includes all young male readers nor excludes female fans. His books encourage young people to value emotional courage in boys as well as physical courage. In writing such courage into his scenarios and recapitulating it in his themes, he insists that the emotional side of life also requires heroes.

Particularly through talking and thinking about materialism and how he relates to other people, Merrick is able to move towards making empowered choices in his life. The novel is funny and frank at times, dark and considered at others: the story will appeal to a broad audience.

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Contact Carolyn Walsh, Education Marketing Manager,  
Ph: +02 8425 0150 Email: [education@allenandunwin.com](mailto:education@allenandunwin.com)

*Changing Gear* is a coming-of-age novel characterised by:

## **Themes**

- value of intergenerational communication
- dealing with parental expectations
- homelessness and materialism: belonging, autonomy and independence
- becoming responsible for oneself as well as becoming a responsible citizen
- discussions of sexuality, focusing on perving, on-line porn and double standards, and the challenge of relating to women as real people
- recognition of the difficulty of dealing with cultural stereotypes of masculinity and the changes in these stereotypes over the generations

## **Textual features**

- Show Don't Tell principle of writing the emotions, especially through the use of dialogue to tell the story
- no chapter breaks: creating an episodic, filmic and immersive story
- a tight and compelling linear narrative (most of the action happens in two weeks)
- naturalistic usage including dialect, vernacular and swearing, interspersed with passages of formal beauty
- a visceral experience of reading, including detailed physical experience and bodily awareness

## **General Capabilities**

The text will support learning in the following capabilities: Literacy, Critical and Creative Thinking; Personal and Social Capability; Ethical Understanding; and Intercultural Understanding.

## **Cross-Curriculum Priorities**

It has some application in building respect for the notions of intimate relationship to land, significance of landform, and learning from nature.

## **Discussion questions**

1. Literary devices such as flashback, dialogue, thoughts, actions and interactions typically create how we 'read' a character in a novel.
  - Which of these are present in the first scenes of *Changing Gear*?
  - Make a list of traits to describe Merrick based on the devices used by Scot Gardner in the first 31 pages.
2. Why do you think the author chose to have Merrick explain his actions (throwing Clint Pearce in the pool, later finding Victor and Dog, and later still killing a bird) by mentally recreating a courtroom drama/comedy? (pp. 17–18, 178, 195–196)
3. *He told me about songlines. In the olden days, the Aboriginal people didn't have maps, not like we know them, anyway.* (p. 134) Define the Indigenous belief system known as songlines and discuss its relevance to Victor and Merrick's journey.
4. Read the scene where Merrick and Victor discuss pornography (pp. 188–192).
  - Did this conversation, and others in the novel make you feel that this is an unusually honest young adult novel?



## In the classroom...

- What do you think it means when fiction is described as 'honest'?
- 5. *Changing Gear* is a first-person narrative.
  - Give three reasons why Scot Gardner might have chosen to use this form over the more traditional third-person narrative.
  - Does his choice make the story more interesting in your opinion?
- 6. 'A quest,' she said.  
*I thought for a moment. 'I like the sound of that.'*  
*'It wasn't supposed to be an allegory – it's a statement of fact. You're on a quest, Merrick, whether you're conscious of it or not.'* (p. 225)
  - Is this a fair description of Merrick's journey, and why?
  - What is the object of Merrick's quest and do you think he attains it by the end of the novel?
  - What role do you think Grandad (through the short sayings that Merrick recalls) and Victor play in this quest?
- 7. Read the scene where Victor and Merrick are attacked by locals accusing them of being paedophiles. (pp. 247–252)
  - What literary devices does Scot Gardner use in this scene to increase the tension and violence? In your answer consider the role of metaphor, simile, sentence length, language/vocabulary.
- 8. 'You spotted the elephant in the room, Sherlock...Can't afford to think too hard or question your life decisions, because the next bloke is waiting for you to take your eyes off the prize.' (p. 218)
  - In a whole class discussion ask students if they think *Changing Gear* advocates living as a homeless person like Victor. If not, what is it advocating?
- 9. **Extension exercise:** define *explicit* versus *implicit* characterisation and find examples of both in the first 31 pages of the novel.
  - In a whole class discussion talk about which might be a more effective tool for the portrayal of complex personalities.

### Other YA books by Scot Gardner

- *Sparrow*, A&U, 2017
- *The Way We Roll*, A&U, 2016
- *The Dead I Know*, A&U, 2011
- *Happy As Larry*, A&U, 2010
- *The Lost King*, Pearson Education Limited, 2008
- *The Other Madonna*, MacMillan Aust., 2008
- *Gravity*, Pan MacMillan, 2006
- *Burning Eddy*, Pan Australia, 2003
- *White Ute Dreaming*, Pan Macmillan Australia, 2002
- *One Dead Seagull*, Pan Macmillan Australia, 2001

## What critics have said of Scot's earlier work

*Gardner doesn't waste time trying to sound cool, he is cool, capturing that highly emotive age so well: the frustration, the need to escape and that frightening realisation that grown-ups are also often unhappy with their lives.* — Jodie Minus, *The Weekend Australian*

*...credible, gutsy writing.*

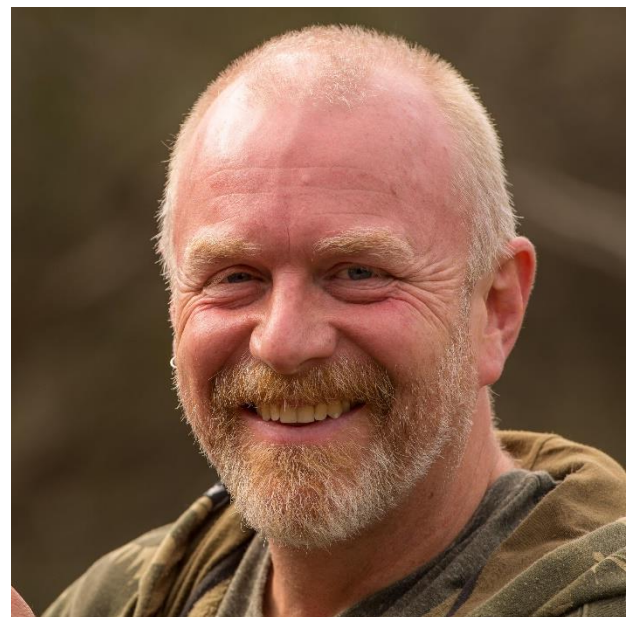
— John Marsden, *The Age*.

*Gardner's use of language is rich with lavish description, memorable characters and a highly compelling narrative. It's the sort of book that stays with you after you've finished it, which is the hallmark of a great story, and a great writer.* — Christian Price CBCA, *Reading Time*

## The author

Scot Gardner became a writer after a chance meeting with a magazine editor while hitchhiking in eastern Australia. Magazine articles led to op-ed newspaper pieces and eventually novels. Scot's first fiction for young adults, *One Dead Seagull*, was published after he attended a writing conference with John Marsden.

More than a decade later, his many books have found local and international favour and garnered praise and awards for their honest take on adolescent life. They include *White Ute Dreaming*, *Burning Eddy*, *Happy as Larry*—winner of the WA Premier's Book Award for young adult fiction—and *The Dead I Know*—winner of the CBCA Book of the Year Award for Older Readers.



## Author's inspiration

'*Changing Gear*, like my other books, was written outside. I write and then I walk. I'm not fond of desks or keyboards and my process has evolved to take advantage of how portable and self-sufficient writing can be. I use pen and paper for the first draft, transcribing by reading to the voice recognition software on my computer. I think the rhythm of the construction process found its way into *Changing Gear* more than any of my previous works – there's a lot of literal walking in the story and a lot of metaphorical walking in the language and syntax.

'The inspiration for *Changing Gear* is clear – I met a "swagman" while riding my motorbike in outback NSW. John "The Highwayman" Cadoret has lived on the side of the road for almost forty years and he irreparably challenged my notions of minimalism and the dominant cultural paradigm over two cups of tea. At the time, my son was embarking on his VCE and (on the back of me meeting The Highwayman) we had long discussions about the value of standardised education and testing and their relationship to material acquisition and happiness.

'The audience for the book is 'questing' youth. Those who are tired of school. Young people who doubt the dream they've been sold by the media, the education system and the culture at large. Those who are looking for meaning beyond the screens and asking awkward questions of themselves and others.'

— Scot Gardner